

Lighthorne Heath Airfield and Settlement by Peter Hinman (2001)

World War II Period

The Gaydon / Lighthorne Heath Air Base was built during 1941 (*see note 1*) and came into use early in 1942. The Lighthorne part of the base, mainly comprising the married quarters, was built later, on the fields laid out on Lighthorne Heath, following enclosure in 1724. Although the old airfield is known as Gaydon, the settlement formed from the old married quarters is still known as Lighthorne Heath. (*Details from field study*). The part of the base which now forms the Motor Heritage Museum was a simple grass landing strip before the war. The building was in two phases: the construction of a satellite training station and later, in 1954, construction of a V bomber base.

On the 13th June 1942 the base opened as a satellite for No.12 Operational Training Unit, based at Chipping Warden. This was a training unit in No.91 Flying Group for night bombers, flying Vickers Wellingtons. When No.91 Group obtained Edgehill as its permanent satellite, Gaydon station was transferred to Wellesbourne Mountford as a satellite. Wellesbourne was home to 22 OTU, a 91 Group station, operating Wellingtons, crewed mainly by Canadians. A and B Flights of 22 OTU, based at Gaydon, became the Wing's training unit until the end of the war. Because of Wellesbourne's runway repairs in 1942, Gaydon was used for operational sorties. Initially, Mk.1c aircraft used the station with Mk.111s arriving in October 1942 and Mk. Xs in 1943.

When completed, the airfield had three runways, two of 1400 yards and one of 1600 yards. Two hangars were built, one type B1 and one T2, with 27 "frying pan" hard standings. Lighting was installed as DREM Mk.11, a directional lighting system. The control tower, built near the B4100, was an unusual three-storey type as once used on Heathrow's north side.



Wellington Mark 1



RAF Gaydon Station Badge

Gaydon was completed too late to send aircraft on the 1000 bomber raids in May and June of 1942. The crews flew many sorties, dropping propaganda leaflets. This was a standard procedure for recently trained crews, to give them additional flying experience on lower risk sorties before they became fully operational. These raids were normally without incident, but in 1943 two aircraft from Gaydon were attacked while on a leaflet mission over Brest and St. Nazaire. One was damaged by a Ju88, losing one engine and part of its hydraulic system in the attack. It crash-landed at Exeter, fortunately without injury to the crew. The newly trained Gaydon aircrew undertook occasional bomb carrying raids. In 1943 five aircraft took part in a raid on Versailles. November 1942 was a bad month for Gaydon. On the 8th November, Wellington DF472 crashed near Harbury, with the loss of two crew members, after “turning into a dead engine” or putting the rudder to port instead of starboard, after the failure of the port engine. This manoeuvre would put the aircraft into a spin which could not be corrected when flying at low level. The following night, 9th November, HF648 plunged into the ground just after take-off due to engine failure. There were no survivors. On the 30th November, HF633 hit trees while circling the aerodrome in bad visibility. Again, there were no survivors from the crew of six. The crew of LT-F had a lucky escape when the aircraft belly-flopped two miles from the end of the runway after both engines cut out at 300 feet, just after take-off.

Keith Douglas, who was a navigator based at RAF Tachbrook, remembers a Wellington from Chipping Warden crashing in bad visibility near the Chesterton windmill. One of the crew died in the accident. Keith’s opinion is that many of the accidents were caused by the inexperience of the crews.

Flying training ceased at Gaydon on July 1st 1945. Control passed to 23 Group Flying Training Command and became part of 23 Glider Training School. May 1946 saw a brief tenure by the Glider Instructors Flight before being put on care and maintenance on August 28th 1946. In 1947 it was placed under the control of 21 (P) AFU as a satellite. (a)

Many aircrew from the RAF Stations at Gaydon, Wellesbourne and Tachbrook would visit Harwoods House during off duty hours. The Lean family, owners of the house at the time, provided late suppers, principally spam and chips, for the airmen. Their son, Pilot Officer Richard C.R.Lean, was killed in 1944 while under basic flying training in Scotland. He is buried in Lighthorne Churchyard.

Other Wartime Details.

There was a searchlight installation behind Keepers Cottage. This unit was operated by the army and may not have been directly connected to the airbase.

Lighthorne had a home guard platoon, mostly manned by farm workers. (b)

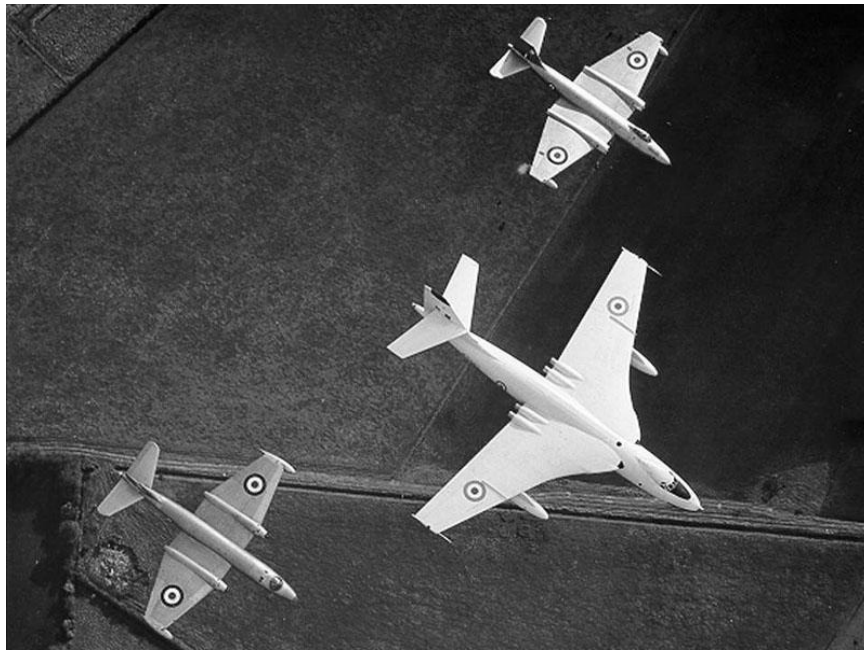


1 J Holder, 2 P Boneham, 3 R Turner, 4 G Hawtin, 5 S Moffat, 6 C Boneham, 7 R White, 8 W Hobday 9 C Blizzard, 10 Philpott, 11 Gardener, 12 W Curtlin 13 P Weelding (?), 14 D Boneham, 15 R Lewis, 16 E Boneham, 17 Philpott, 18 E Curtlin 19 W Gardener, 20 F Crump, 21 A Palmer, 22 R Verney, 23 C Coe, 24 Capt. Henderson, 25 A Duckett, 26 A Lawrence, 27 F Neil, 28 P Weelding (?), 29 R Seeney, 30 A Holder, 31 Smallbone, 32 W Philpott, 33 R Tree.

V Bomber Base

In 1953, Gaydon was selected for reconstruction as a V-Bomber training base and John Laing & Son started work that spring. The original site was to become the technical area; a large tract of farmland to the southwest had been acquired for a new 3000 yard runway with parallel taxiway and access tracks. Excavation involved the removal of half a million cubic yards of earth. 80,000 square yards of concrete from the wartime runways and perimeter track were broken up to make hardcore for the new runway. In addition, 700 trees were felled and three ponds filled in. Laings' contract included the construction of over 100 buildings, including a new control tower, since the original was nowhere near the new runway. The married quarters were also built at this time. The contractor was believed to have been Minty. (See note 2) The War Office, as the MOD was then known, published two notices referring to the closure of footpaths and bridleways at this time. (c)(d)

A virtually new airfield opened on March 1st 1954, under the control of No.3 Group Bomber Command. However, it was not until January 1st 1955 that No.138 Squadron was formed as the first Valiant squadron. After "working up" they moved to Wittering on 6th July. They were followed by 543 Squadron, equipped with the photographic reconnaissance version of the Valiant and Canberra T4s, for runway approach aid training, departing after training for Wyton on 18th November. Meanwhile, on 4th July 1955, No.232 Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) was formed at Gaydon with Valiants and later, from the 11th November, with 7 Victors.



A Valiant with two Canberra bombers flying in formation.

On October 2nd 1962, Victor XA 934 crashed in Combrook Woods, killing several of the crew.
(See note 3)

No. 232 OCU was disbanded in June 1965, its task of training the Valiant and Victor crews completed. Gaydon then became home to No.2 Air Navigation School, transferred from Hullavington. The school taught basic navigation, passing the trainees on to No.1 ANS at Stradishall for advanced training. The navigation school remained at Gaydon until May 1970 when it transferred to Fillingley. The Strike Command Special Avionics Servicing Unit of No.1 Group lodged at Gaydon until disbanded on December 1st 1971. Control passed to 71 MU Bicester Maintenance Command on April 1st 1972, under care and maintenance, until closure on 31st October 1974.



Handley Page Victor Bomber.

From April 1st 1966 until 1977, No.637 Gliding School used the site and up to 1975 the annual RAFA Midland Air Display was held at Gaydon. From 1976, the display was held at Coventry Airport.

In 1972 the base and married quarters became 'home' to some 2000 Asian refugees from Uganda. Press cuttings from the time relate the considerable efforts by the local community in assisting the WRVS in making these people welcome. (See the article "Gaydon - Home to Ugandan Asians" by Michael Sweet for further information.) Michael Sweet had specific responsibilities for educational resettlement. The housing of the refugees was the responsibility of Mr. John Darling. (e)(f)(g)(h)

The airbase came into use as temporary premises for the children of Southam High School soon after the Asians left. The buildings of the school were breaking up due to the use of high alumina cement in its construction. The children were located at Gaydon for two terms while the repairs were carried out.

The Last commanding officer at Gaydon was Tom Knight, who became the Vicar of Southam on his return to civilian life. A cartoon is said to exist in the Birmingham Post archives showing him walking around the base following its conversion to a test track.

Civil Period.

Conversion to test track. Discussion with Bob Lyle, who was responsible for the layout of the test track in 1976. Part of the agreement was that there would be no further development of car manufacturing at the plant.

The officers' quarters were let for a time to the United States forces. The other ranks' quarters were sold to Stratford District Council in two stages, the first in 1976, with the final batch of 48 in 1981. A high fence separated the quarters until 1978 when the USA forces left. (Nick Baker says he bought his house in as one of a batch of 48 in 1981, directly from the MOD. He has the estate agents' (Cartwright Holt) details.) The officers' quarters were sold as Kingston Fields because of the perceived stigma associated with parts of Lighthorne Heath. There was also an unsuccessful tenants' campaign to retain the bollards which had separated the officers' quarters and the other ranks' quarters. The existing NAAFI shop became the village shop and the school was taken over by the education authority. (See note 4) Children from Lighthorne had been using the school for some years. (See note 5) Barbara Townsend remembers schoolchildren taking part in a school nativity play with the Ugandan Asian children in 1972.

A number of MOD tenants were still occupying some of the houses, mainly army families from the CAD at Kineton. A number of these were single parent families where there was no longer a military connection. 98% of the new tenants came from the Stratford District, many from other rural locations. Despite objections from many council executives, approximately 20 "difficult" tenants were moved into the settlement. The fear was that these tenants, combined with the low-income families from the MOD, would form a troublesome core which would influence the whole estate. In fact these fears proved groundless and apart from a few isolated cases all families either assimilated or moved on. (i)(j)

Additional building and infilling has increased the population of the settlement to over 1000. With over 90% of the houses now in private ownership, Lighthorne Heath has grown into a pleasant and prosperous community with its own parish council.

Sources

- (a) LH75 “Royal Air Force Gaydon, a Brief History”, British Motor Industry Heritage Trust (2001).
- (b) Photograph from David Humphriss collection.
- (c) Press Cutting
- (d) Press Cutting
- (e) Warwick Advertiser October 20th 1972
- (f) Warwick Advertiser October 27th 1972
- (g) Warwick Advertiser November 3rd 1972
- (h) Warwick Advertiser November 17th 1972
- (i) Michael Ridger, Education
- (j) “Gaydon – Home to Ugandan Asians” by Michael Sweet.

Notes re further research

1. *The actual date of construction needs to be verified*
2. *Confirm name of contractor. George Adams says he worked as a foreman on the construction project and that the contractor was Minty.*
3. *The History Society has a detailed account of the crash by an eye witness. (LH138)*
4. *When were the officers’ quarters sold?*
5. *Confirm dates when the council took possession.*
6. *When did the children start using the school?*